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After Patt Derian Leaves State, Whither Human Rights Policy?

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Patt Derian plans to stay home on Inauguration Day next Tuesday. That's in contrast to four years ago, when even the arrival of a furniture-laden moving van 20 minutes before Jimmy Carter was due to be sworn in couldn't keep her away.

Inevitably, there's a temptation to take that as a metaphor for how quickly Ronald Reagan is expected to downgrade many of the Carter administration's key policy priorities. Among the first candidates for this whittling away is the effort to make human rights a consideration in the conduct of foreign policy.

For four years, Derian — a Mississippi housewife who never had held a paying job — personified that policy. As Carter's assistant secretary of state for human rights, the bluntly outspoken Derian waged an unceasing battle to force governmental leaders abroad and entrenched bureaucrats at home to revise their traditional view that moral judgments have no place among the power politics of diplomacy.

Now, buoyed by repeated statements from the Reagan camp that human rights factors no longer will be a major determinant of U.S. foreign relations, Derian's myriad opponents are counting the days until the influence she wielded is eliminated. Derian, though, isn't so sure that her work can be relegated to the attic quite so easily.

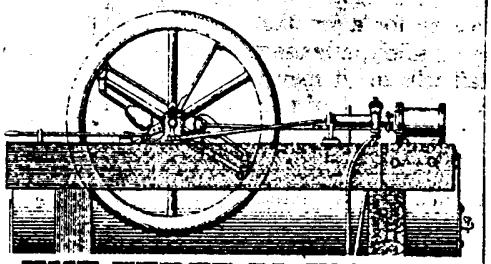
"What Reagan and his people have been saying about human rights is not based on reality — on knowledge of the situation, the law and the methods and machinery that the law imposes on this government," she says. "My hope is that once they've pondered the law and gotten a good fix on the situation, they'll drop all this strange talk, face the fact that human rights have become a fact of life in foreign policy and start thinking about what has to be done to make the policy better and more consistent."

The reality, Derian contends, is that Carter's championing of human rights "saved an awful lot of people's lives" and, as a result, raised expectations among the people of the communist bloc and the Third World.

"It reached the point where practically every important national leader felt compelled to stand up — hand placed piously on heart — and swear his loyalty to the human rights factor in international relations," she says. "Once that happens, people expect tangible evidence that this fervent regard for principles is being translated into practical results, and if the evidence isn't forthcoming people will chafe, with increasingly dangerous consequences, at repression."

"What we did was so unprecedented because it touched lives, governments, organizations and institutions," she says, adding: "My hardest task was to make that clear to a bureaucracy that for 100 years had been weaned on the idea that American political, commercial or security interests were the only things that counted in diplomacy. I tried to make them see that human rights was something that wouldn't tarnish their polished and exquisite view of classical diplomacy, but that actually could serve as a powerful new weapon for American interests . . . ."

Although her husband, former State Department spokesman Hodding Carter, recent-



ly wrote a much-remarked account of the infighting among leading Carter administration policymakers, Derian says she will not "publicly bash" those who opposed her ideas. But their identities are implicit in her comment that "certain organs of the government — in particular the bureaus of the State Department that deal with different global regions, the Pentagon, the CIA, the staff of the National Security Council — all have a tendency to view policy from their own narrow perspectives and an excess of clientitis."

"It was pathetic," she recalls, "the way

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these groups were always arguing that we overlook the excesses of X government or adjust to Y government because they don't understand our system and democratic ways. It gave our foreign policy a spineless, weak-kneed quality."

That attitude led Derian into a number of battles that already have become legends within the State Department. She didn't win them all (Iran before the revolution and South Korea are two instances where she concedes that human rights were made secondary to strategic considerations), but when it came to other areas, particularly Latin America and Southern Africa, the bureaucrats quickly learned that Derian wasn't simply a nice, do-gooding lady whose ideas could be ignored.

In part, that was because she had considerable clout with Carter and his two secretaries of state: Cyrus R. Vance and Edmund S. Muskie. But Derian and her aides were able to build on that influence to make the views of the bureau of human rights a major factor in determining economic and military aid.

The power to deny assistance to dictatorial regimes because of poor human rights records was the principal innovation Derian introduced into the policy-making machinery. It also is the one the Reagan people have talked most about eliminating, on the grounds that it was applied in an erratic and inconsistent way, and that the primary consideration in dispensing aid should be the U.S. national interest.

On the first point, Derian admits the criticism is justified. She says, "We did things on a country-by-country and case-by-case basis, and that ultimately proved to be a very limiting and erroneous approach."

But, she adds, "that's where a Reagan administration could improve the system. It could formulate a series of guidelines, based on basic principles of decent behavior, against which to weigh all countries being considered for economic or military aid." As to the idea that American interests are served by supporting dictators, Derian shows no patience. "Take Central America, where they talk about backing rightist governments because otherwise the Cubans will take over. Well, when people are oppressed and ripe for exploitation, that kind of approach lets them win on the cheap."

Derian has no illusions that the new administration will start out disposed to take her advice. But she is hopeful it might learn.

"The president-elect has said he wants to make Washington 'a shining city on a hill.' I don't think he's talking about one made out of sequins. What makes us solid and sparkling is our freedom and our adherence to democratic values," she says. "If you try to be one kind of government at home and another kind in your foreign relations, you've kicked away half of the girders that you need to build that 'shining city on the hill.'"